

“Harry Bluff” and the Curious Origin of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery (BUMED): August 31, 1842

U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery

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Date: 08.30.2023

Posted: 08.30.2023 14:26

News ID: 452461

August 31st remains a less well-known anniversary in the U.S. Navy. On this date in 1842, Congress passed a Navy appropriations bill establishing five bureaus to oversee Navy Yards and Docks; Construction, Equipment, and Repair; Provisions and Clothing; Ordnance and Hydrography; and Medicine and Surgery. Today, of the original five bureaus, only the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery (BUMED) remains.

As BUMED celebrates its 181st anniversary on August 31st there is no better time to look back at the curious origin of the forgotten Navy bureau system.

The story begins in part with a once legendary arts and culture journal called *The Southern Literary Messenger*. This journal may be best known today for its association with Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) who served as its co-editor from 1835 to 1836. Poe published some of his early literature reviews and fantastical tales in the journal's pages, among them *Berenice* and *the Unparalleled Adventures of One Hans Pfall*. In December 1836, *The Messenger's* founder, Thomas Willis White (1788-1843) relieved Poe of his duties because of the literary lion's increasingly “erratic behavior.” Poe's departure left a sizable void that was partly be filled by a naval officer named Lt. Matthew Fontaine Maury (1806-1873).

Maury was later known for pioneering the field of oceanographer while serving as Superintendent of the Naval Depot of Charts and Instruments/U.S. Naval Observatory (1844-1861). He was also a literary man with outspoken views on naval affairs. In 1839, Maury began serving as an associate editor of the *Messenger*. His contributions included a series of articles about the Navy entitled “Scraps from the Lucky Bag” written under the nom de plume “Harry Bluff.” In nautical terms, a “lucky bag” was a locker on old ships where “lost” and loose items (clothing, etc.) were stored away.

In his first article, “Harry Bluff” remarked on the poor state of the Navy and proposed several drastic reforms. He called for the establishment of a “navy institute of learning” equivalent to West Point, a complete reorganization of the Navy command structure, and the replacement of the existing Navy Board of Commissioners by a bureau system that offered checks and balances. These “scraps” proved to be of great interest to military and political leaders of the day. Many of these articles were republished in their entirety, further stirring questions about their authorship. Who was the real Harry Bluff? Only Maury, his wife, and Thomas White, the publisher, knew his true identity. And it would take years of speculation before Maury's secret identity was eventually discovered, but when it was, he became an instant celebrity.

One Washington newspaper, *The National Intelligencer*, went so far as to urge that President John Tyler appoint Maury as the Secretary of the Navy. However, such prospect for promotion was of little interest to Maury. In a letter dated January 10, 1841, Maury wrote that the prospect of resigning his commission, becoming a civilian, and then being elevated to the role of Secretary just did not interest him. “I was much annoyed at finding myself put in nomination for secretaryship, for I thought it was a sure way of defeating the object of the ‘Scraps.’ Though I think now the effect will be to call public attention to them and consequently lead to reform on the one hand, while, on



the other, it will whet up the animosity of the old officers, a portion of them at least, so as to gain for me the honor of a sly cuff from them now and then.”

In July 1841, The Messenger formally acknowledged that Harry Bluff was Matthew Maury. The periodical published a biographical sketch of him written by a “Brother Officer.” And despite calls for his promotion, Maury stayed in the Navy as a lieutenant, only getting promoted after his recommended reforms in evaluating officers went into effect in 1855.

Remarkably, Congress took heed of many of Maury’s calls for naval reform. On August 31, 1842, the U.S. Navy officially adopted a bureau system to replace the inefficient Naval Board of Commissioners; and in 1845 the Naval Academy was formally established in Annapolis, Maryland.

BUMED would share another curious connection with Maury. From 1942 to 2012, BUMED occupied the old U.S. Naval Observatory in Foggy Bottom, Washington, D.C., in the very same building from where Maury established his reputation as an oceanographer from 1844 to 1861.

For 181 years, BUMED has served as the guardian of healthcare for Sailors and Marines and helping ensure the readiness of our warfighters. Today, this mission continues and remains as important as it did in 1842. And however curious it may be, perhaps a man who called himself “Harry Bluff” deserves a modicum of thanks for this.

Bureau of Medicine and Surgery (BUMED) Historical Notes:

1842. Surgeon William P.C. Barton is appointed the first Chief of BUMED in September 1842. In addition to being a leading physician and botanist of his day, Barton was an accomplished musician, the son of the designer of the U.S. Seal, and nephew of famed naturalist Dr. Benjamin Smith Barton.

1842. In September 1842, Moses Poor of New Hampshire, and Marsh Clark of Pennsylvania reported to BUMED as clerk and messenger, respectively. They are the first civilian employees to work at BUMED.

1842. Role of Chief of BUMED is defined on October 26, 1842. Secretary of the Navy Abel Upshur wrote, “The Medical officers of the Navy will make all communications and requisitions connected with their duty direct to the Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery to this Department, and they will obey all orders and instructions which may be issued by that Bureau in which only their requisitions are required to be approved.”

1844. Surgeon Charles Fleury Bien-aime Guillou becomes the first Assistant Chief of BUMED. After 1871, this title would morph into the position of Deputy Surgeon General and Deputy Chief of BUMED.

1871. Chief of BUMED takes on additional title of Surgeon General of the U.S. Navy on March 3, 1871. Commodore William Maxwell Wood, a veteran of the Mexican and Civil Wars, is the first individual to hold the title of Surgeon General.

1930. Rear Admiral Ammen Farenholt becomes the first flag officer to serve as Deputy Surgeon General. Farenholt’s father Oscar had been the first enlisted man to reach flag rank in the Navy. From the 1920s through 1940s, Ammen Farenholt commissioned the installation of sun dials at Naval Hospitals. Many of these still exist across the Navy Medicine today.

1942. BUMED relocates from the main Navy Building on National Mall to the Naval Hospital Washington, D.C. campus in Foggy Bottom (originally home of the U.S. Naval Observatory).

1982. BUMED is deactivated and replaced with the Naval Medical Command (NAVMEDCOM). Surgeon General of the Navy takes on additional title of Director of Navy Medicine.

1989. NAVMEDCOM is disestablished and BUMED is reactivated.

2012. BUMED Headquarters relocates to the Defense Health Headquarters (DHHQ) in Falls Church, Virginia.

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